

Parenting Exceptional Children

A strengths-based approach to raising autistic, ADHD and other neurodivergent children

Until recently, conditions such as autism or ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) were treated as disorders or a set of deficits that needed to be treated or managed. Fortunately, there is now a realisation that these are neurodivergent brain differences that come with as many strengths as challenges. Indeed many of the challenges for children with ADHD and/or autism are caused by misunderstanding their needs and how they communicate, as well as a school system that mainly caters for the way neurotypical children learn.

Society does not yet fully understand and embrace neurodivergent communication and learning styles. This is despite the fact that formal diagnosis rates for autism and ADHD children have risen sharply in recent years. Positively, these rising rates represent an increased identification of the needs of neurodivergent children and particularly girls whose needs had not been recognised previously. In addition, there are many more undiagnosed children and adults in society who might meet the criteria for autism or ADHD. Some estimates suggest that between 15 and 20 per cent of all children are neurodivergent (ND) and the majority do not have a formal diagnosis.

Autistic and ADHD children belong to a family of neurodevelopmental differences that become apparent as children grow up. These include dyspraxia, sensory processing disorder, tic disorders, dyslexia, dyscalculia, synaesthesia, epilepsy and intellectual disabilities, as well as many other conditions. There is great overlap between each of these conditions and many neurodivergent children meet the criteria for more than one. For example, an estimated 50-70 per cent of children with autism also meet the criteria for ADHD. Let's look now at these two common and often misunderstood diagnoses.

Understanding Autism

Autism is a lifelong developmental difference in how a person communicates and relates to others, as well as in how they experience the world around them. When your child is autistic you might observe differences such as:

- How they **communicate** and behave with peers.
- Delays/differences in how they learn and use **language**.
- Not keeping to "**social rules**" in communication with peers.
- Strong or **intense interest** in certain subjects (TV shows, music or books).
- Preferences for certain **routines and repeated activities** (organising toys, eating food the same way).
- Engaging in **stimming** behaviours to relax and regulate such as rocking, flapping, hair twirling, rubbing hands, skin picking, and pacing.
- **Hypersensitive** to certain sensory input (distress at bright lights or loud noises when out).
- **Hyposensitive** to other sensory input (need to be constantly fidgeting or moving to keep focused).

Sometimes, children learn to "mask" their autistic communication. This is particularly the case for girls who might be socialised to repress their natural communication style to "fit in" and avoid judgment from other children or adults. Excessive masking can cause great stress for children.

It is important to note that autistic differences bring **many strengths**, such as direct communication, persistence in routines, loyalty in friendships, as well as being an independent thinker and avoiding a "herd mentality".

Understanding ADHD

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is often misunderstood as an inability to pay attention, when in reality ADHD children can usually attend and 'hyperfocus' on tasks that interest them. When actually, ADHD represents challenges in **managing** and **regulating attention** such as:

- Attending to tasks or subjects they find "boring".
- Getting started or changing focus from one task to another.
- Planning, sequencing and organising tasks.

ADHD is also **characterised** by being:

- Active, restless and full of energy in body and mind.
- Prone to burnout and exhaustion.
- Impulsive in what they say and do.
- Emotional and sensitive to rejection.

ADHD also brings **many strengths** such as an ability to think creatively/generate new ideas, a passion for special subjects as well as emotional warmth and a high-energy communication style.

Neurodiverse Families

Neurodivergent children are much more likely to have neurodivergent parents, siblings and extended family. When you start the journey exploring your child's needs and seeking assessment, it is worth also taking a pause to consider your own needs and those of your other family members.

Being a ND parent can be helpful in understanding your children. One father I worked with was often frustrated at his ADHD son as his behaviour triggered memories of his own struggles in school. However, once he considered he might also be ADHD and got his own support, sharing the same label greatly increased his compassion. He became much more bonded to his son in his struggles and his strengths as they explored their shared passion for bikes and hiking.

Sometimes, being an ND parent can be challenging, especially when you are different from your children. For example, you might be an autistic Dad, who needs the home to be spic and span to feel relaxed and regulated, whereas your ADHD, dyspraxic son might be "all over the place", constantly creating mess. Or you could be a chatty ADHD mum who clashes with your autistic daughter who finds talking after school overwhelming and needs a break from communicating. Or your sensory preferences might diverge. You might need quiet music in the evening to relax and unwind, whereas your child might need a period of loud music and dancing to help regulate themselves.

As you begin to understand your child's needs it is important to become self-aware of your own needs and those of your other family members. The most important thing to realise is that your needs and preferences might be different and to take steps to accommodate everyone in the family.

Parent Journey

Parenting a ND child can sometimes feel like a long journey. When your child is young you might worry about their development and experience behaviour challenges. When they go to school, these challenges might increase, and unfortunately many parents feel judged and isolated. Seeking professional assessment can be problematic as there are usually long waiting lists and it can be confusing and difficult to find the right supports for your child's needs. As a result many families wait for long periods feeling isolated without helpful understanding and support.

While a professional diagnosis may be important in understanding your child's needs (and is essential in getting educational resources in school), you can start getting support immediately by informing yourself and reaching out to others. Start by contacting neuro-affirming organisations such as asiam.ie and adhdireland.ie who will link you in with others on the same journey and signpost you to the step.

Also, you don't need a professional diagnosis to gain support. Over half of the families who attend the Parents Plus ADHD programme, via ADHD Ireland, don't have a confirmed diagnosis and report benefits from attending and meeting other parents. Also, sometimes it is best to not immediately seek formal diagnosis and to wait until your child is ready to engage in this process. For example, you might wonder if your young teenage daughter is autistic, but she may not be ready to explore this until she is older. However, you can still inform yourself about autism and use this information to help you respond more compassionately and more supportively to her needs.

Understanding Your Unique Child

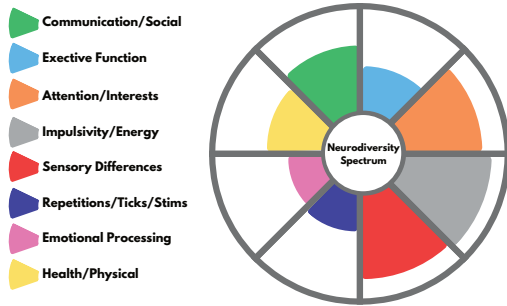
Autism and ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) are spectrum conditions, meaning that children are affected in a wide variety of different ways. Children are likely to come with a "spiky" profile, meaning that they might have high ability and strengths in one life area, but experience challenges and disability in another. For example, your child might be good at maths and struggle to tie their shoelaces. Or they might be able to spend hours immersed in a favourite sport, but struggle to attend for five minutes sitting at a table doing homework.

Also, neurodivergent children can have a wide range in support needs. For example, an autistic child with an intellectual disability may need a high level of ongoing support at home and in school, whereas another child may have intermittent or hidden needs such as dealing with anxiety or managing sensory challenges in the classroom.

In addition, many of the challenges ND children face are caused by barriers in a world that does not accommodate their needs and differences. For example, an ADHD child may need movement and experiential learning, but this may not be provided in a typical school when children (especially those who are undiagnosed) are expected to sit for long hours at a desk reading or listening.

Getting a good picture of your child's strengths and challenges is crucial to understanding and supporting them. Seeking multidisciplinary assessment from professionals such as OTs (occupational therapists), SLTs (speech and language therapists), psychologists and others can give you a broad picture of how your child manages across several domains.

As a parent, you can also take time to consider your child’s strengths and needs in some different life areas. Below are some to consider and there may be others you can think of as well.



Communication and Social

Neurodivergent children often communicate differently to their neurotypical peers. Sometimes, they can be quiet or situationally mute and, sometimes, they can talk honestly “outside the social code”. Sometimes, they can be friendly and form relationships quickly, but, sometimes, this leaves them vulnerable when not in a supportive peer group. It is important to appreciate how your child communicates and to help them “find their tribe” where they are understood and accepted.

Executive Function

Planning, prioritising and getting organised to complete tasks can be challenging, particularly for those with ADHD. This can result in long periods of procrastination, getting distracted, forgetting important things and consequential underperformance. As a parent you can support your child by establishing good routines, shared problem solving and working through planning strategies.

Attention and Interests

Intense passions and interests are often important for autistic and ADHD children and represent the way they relax and enjoy themselves. These can include TV shows, video games, sport, music, history, collecting things and many others. While some autistic children might have a more fixed set of interests, some ADHD children might rapidly switch interests and move on quickly.

Impulsivity and Energy

Some children can be energetic, active and impulsive. Sometimes, this can be experienced as physical overactivity and, other times, it can be mental restlessness and racing thoughts. While this can bring challenges it can also bring spirit, spontaneity and creativity. As a result of this activity, ND children are prone to burnout and meltdowns when they become overwhelmed.

Sensory Differences

These include hypersensitivity to certain sounds or sights (e.g. agitation at other people chewing) or needing certain sensory stimulation (e.g. fidgeting or stimming) to keep focused. While such sensory differences can bring challenges, they can also bring a rich sensory experience of the world whether this is increased perception in nature or fresh inspiration in art or music.

Repetitions, Tics and Stims

Repetitive behaviours, tics and stims such as, hair twirling, rubbing hands, skin picking, twitching and pacing are common. These behaviours can increase during agitation and stress and are often important ways for a child to relax and regulate. Some children also need predictability and routines to manage the world and find it stressful when things change especially at short notice.

Emotional Processing

Children can experience and process emotions differently. Some find it hard to identify and describe emotions in the same way neurotypical peers and some feel positive and negative emotions intensely. Some might be very sensitive to rejection and can easily get upset.

Health and Physical

Neurodivergent children are more likely to experience health and physical challenges such as autoimmune disorders, symptomatic hypermobility, chronic fatigue, irritable bowel syndrome, EDS (Ehlers-Danlos syndromes), fibromyalgia, as well as many others. It is very important to anticipate these physical needs which are often missed so your child can get the right treatment and support.

Building Your Relationship

As with all children, good parenting is primarily about establishing warm connected relationships and this is no different for neurodivergent children. You want your child to feel understood, affirmed and loved by you. You want them to feel listened to and that they can communicate with you about anything. And you want them to feel you are on their side and there for them no matter what.

There are lots of practical things you can do to create these warm connected relationships such as:

1. Making sure you have **daily connecting times** when you enjoy each other's company.
 - for young children, these can be a daily playtime.
 - for teens, they can be a chatting time when you are available to listen.
2. Finding ways to **encourage and affirm** your children.
3. Learning to **pause** and reduce the times you communicate negatively to your children.

For neurodivergent children, sometimes there can be blocks to connected relationships with their parents. Sometimes, children are so stressed by school and the outside world that this leads to challenging meltdowns at home. Sometimes, parents feel their role is to correct their child's different behaviours which sets you up as a critical parent and only makes your child feel bad about themselves.

Learning to **accept** your children as they are and to be **compassionate** about the challenges they face transforms relationships. For example:











- Rather than continuing an ongoing homework battle with your ADHD son, you can first prioritise the physical playtime he loves to have with you and do that first. You can also collaborate with the school to reduce formal homework and focus on projects that match his learning style.
- Rather than putting demands on your autistic daughter to talk about school at mealtime which can provoke a meltdown, you can give her time to decompress and relax watching her videos. Later you can look for better opportunities to connect and chat to her.
- Rather than correcting your son's constant talk about his fantasy games, you can join in and find out more about them. You can use the games as a special way to connect with him and to understand his world.

This handout is based on the first two articles in the Parenting Exceptional Children series of articles published in the Irish Times in March/ April 2024.

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







Reflective Exercise 1 - Your Journey as a Parent

- Take a moment to reflect on your journey as a parent of a neurodivergent child.

	What diagnoses does your child have?
	What other undiagnosed needs or conditions might your child have?
	What are your current challenges ?
	What is currently going well for your child?
	What has worked well for you in managing challenges ?
	What milestones are you currently facing?
	What are your current goals for your child ?
	What are your current goals for yourself as a parent ?
	What is the next step for you?
	What supports might help you?









Reflective Exercise 2 - Building a Map of your Child's World

- Take a moment to identify your child strengths and challenges across the domains below. Try to get inside their mind and understand how they think, feel and see the world.

<p>COMMUNICATION</p> 	<p>How does your child communicate with you?</p> <p>How do they get on with others socially?</p>
<p>EXECUTIVE FUNCTION</p> 	<p>How does your child plan and organise themselves?</p> <p>How do they start and complete tasks?</p>
<p>ATTENTION</p> 	<p>What subjects and activities capture your child's interest?</p> <p>What do they find hard to pay attention to?</p>
<p>ENERGY</p> 	<p>Does your child act without thinking?</p> <p>How active and full of energy are they?</p>
<p>SENSATIONS</p> 	<p>What sensory experiences does your child like?</p> <p>What sensory experiences do they find distressing?</p>
<p>REPETITIONS</p> 	<p>What repetitive behaviours and habits does your child have?</p> <p>What routines do they need?</p>
<p>EMOTIONS</p> 	<p>How does your child communicate their feelings?</p> <p>How do they regulate their emotions when upset?</p>
<p>HEALTH</p> 	<p>Does your child have health needs?</p> <p>Do they have any other health needs that may need further exploring?</p>
<p>OTHER</p> 	<p>What other strengths, needs and differences have you observed in your child?</p> <p>What other supports might they need?</p> <p>How are they coping with the challenges they face?</p>

Reflective Exercise 3 - Your Child's Sensory World

For You:	Your Child:
When you are stressed or agitated how does it show in your body ?	When your child is stressed or agitated how does it show in their body ?
What helps you relax your body when you are stressed?	What helps your child relax their body when they are stressed?
How do you like to be touched when you are upset ?	How does your child like to be touched when upset ?
What is your favourite sensory experience that you really enjoy?	What is your child's favourite sensory experience that they really enjoy?

	For You:	For My Child:
 <p>What sounds do you love to hear? What sounds annoy you?</p>		
 <p>What visuals do you like to look at? Which visuals repel you?</p>		
 <p>What types of touch soothe you? What types of touch do you dislike?</p>		
 <p>What scents really attract you? Which scents repulse you?</p>		
 <p>What are your favourite flavours? What flavours disgust you?</p>		
 <p>What rhythmic movements relax you? What movement agitates you?</p>		
 <p>Do you like heavy or light pressure ? Do you like a deep hug or gently strokes?</p>		
 <p>What internal feelings do you really notice? What ones might you be out of touch with?</p>		